

INTRODUCTION

Louis Nowra's *Così* takes its audience into a rarefied world; not just the world of the mentally ill, but the past – a lost time of political drama, dogmatic activism and notions of ideological correctness that now seem as antique and period specific as the operatic fantasies of the apparently delusional Roy. *Così* is a memory play as Nowra's preamble, 'Trial by Madmen', makes clear:

'So who was I then, and how much was I like Lewis? I was a person who was very much removed from what was around him. Working with mental patients seemed to me to be something to believe in, something far removed from the political rhetoric of the anti-Vietnam war protests of the late 1960s.'

One of the most successful aspects of Nowra's play is the way in which it depicts Lewis's attempts to remove himself from the 'political rhetoric' of the period, but just how persistent this rhetoric is in pursuing him right into the confines of a mental institution. Lewis ultimately does not escape the moment of history that he is living through, and not simply because of the smug lectures on political art and engagement that he must suffer in the form of his friend Nick and girlfriend Lucy. Both these characters seem to represent the most familiar slogans of the era but are effectively two dimensional and pale beside the other characters who are patients in the institution. The real issues and social contradictions of the time come through the speeches and actions of Lewis's 'cast' and the individual situations they have experienced which have led to them being confined in an asylum.

The play is set in 1971, a year before the historic election of the Whitlam Labor government, ending twenty-six years of unbroken Liberal rule. The time of the play is significant in a number of ways. Another important play that deals with the era of the counterculture, but is also set before Whitlam's victory, is David Williamson's *Don's Party*. Williamson's play is crucially set on election eve 1969, a night when Labor was expected to win but suffered yet another defeat, seeming to signal the impossibility of not just electoral change but anything approaching radical or transformative social change in Australia. Like Williamson's play, *Così* is situated at the edge of a drawn out period of conservative government and ossified social attitudes that had appeared resistant to all the momentous stirrings of worldwide social unrest, anti-war and anti-colonial protest, calls for social justice for minorities, equality for women, third world liberation, and civil and gay rights that had defined the decade just past, finally culminating in the events of May 1968. The social rules had been drastically re-drawn in practically every nation in the Western world, yet Australia appeared to be a single exception, highlighting its isolation and the cultural 'tyranny of distance' that seemed set to deny Australia's youth their very own experience of generational revolt and the romance of revolution.

The anti-war movement of the time changed all that. The Vietnam moratoriums remain the largest popular protests in Australia's history, rivalled only by the more recent opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 by the United States and its allies, among them Australia. Yet the protagonist of Nowra's play is in flight from these protests. Like the writer's own description of himself as a young man, Lewis is curiously removed from the turbulence of the times and appears to be seeking a retreat, if not a refuge, among the patients of the institution. Asked by Henry who exactly he supports in the war, Lewis attempts an unconvincing answer by claiming

that he supports the Vietcong against American imperialism; but as the discussion becomes increasingly violent and Henry's accusations of being a traitor become more frenzied, Lewis announces:

'Henry, I am not a communist. I do not send money to North Vietnam for medical supplies...I am not supporting the enemy. We must support any way of getting Australia and America out of this quagmire'.

Exchanges such as this one raise the very obvious question: what exactly is the attitude of the play to the era in which it is set and the major social movements that were re-shaping Australian society? The play is not a straightforward celebration of the late sixties and early seventies, of the counterculture and the social moment when radical change seemed within reach. Nor, however, is the play a simple denunciation of these energies. Nowra is scathing of the brash self-confidence and arrogance of characters like Nick and Lucy. He reserves most of the play's venom for their smug complacency that change is inevitable and that they will ride the crest of the revolution as a natural birth right, being educated and middle-class, unlike most of the patients that Lewis meets. Their ultimate fate, as a parliamentarian and academic respectively, casts a final judgement on the depth of their radical passions.

So is *Così* most accurately read as a critique of the vanity and presumptuousness of the youth movement of the early seventies? Has Nowra, like so many 'sixties survivors', turned a disappointed and resentful eye back over the period, and unearthed only its superficial pretensions to political change? This is not a reading that is supported by the text of the play. Despite its unqualified rejection of both Nick and Lucy, the play is more concerned to excavate a moment in time that cannot be reduced to slogans and rhetoric. Nowra crafts a memory play that is authentically concerned with capturing the contradictions and the pretensions of the period. Lewis's confusion and ambivalence are certainly as valid a set of period markers as Nick's hyperbole and arrogance. *Così* questions the settled assumptions that now define exactly what that time was all about. In many ways, Nowra has successfully re-captured the strangeness and uncanny aspects of such a turbulent and divisive social moment. *Così* is not an anti-sixties or an anti-counterculture play. It examines a significant moment of change in order to examine its peculiarity and surreal qualities. One might almost say that Nowra has applied the Brechtian technique of the alienation effect in order to situate his audience so they can see this time anew, with the necessary critical detachment that will allow the period to live again.